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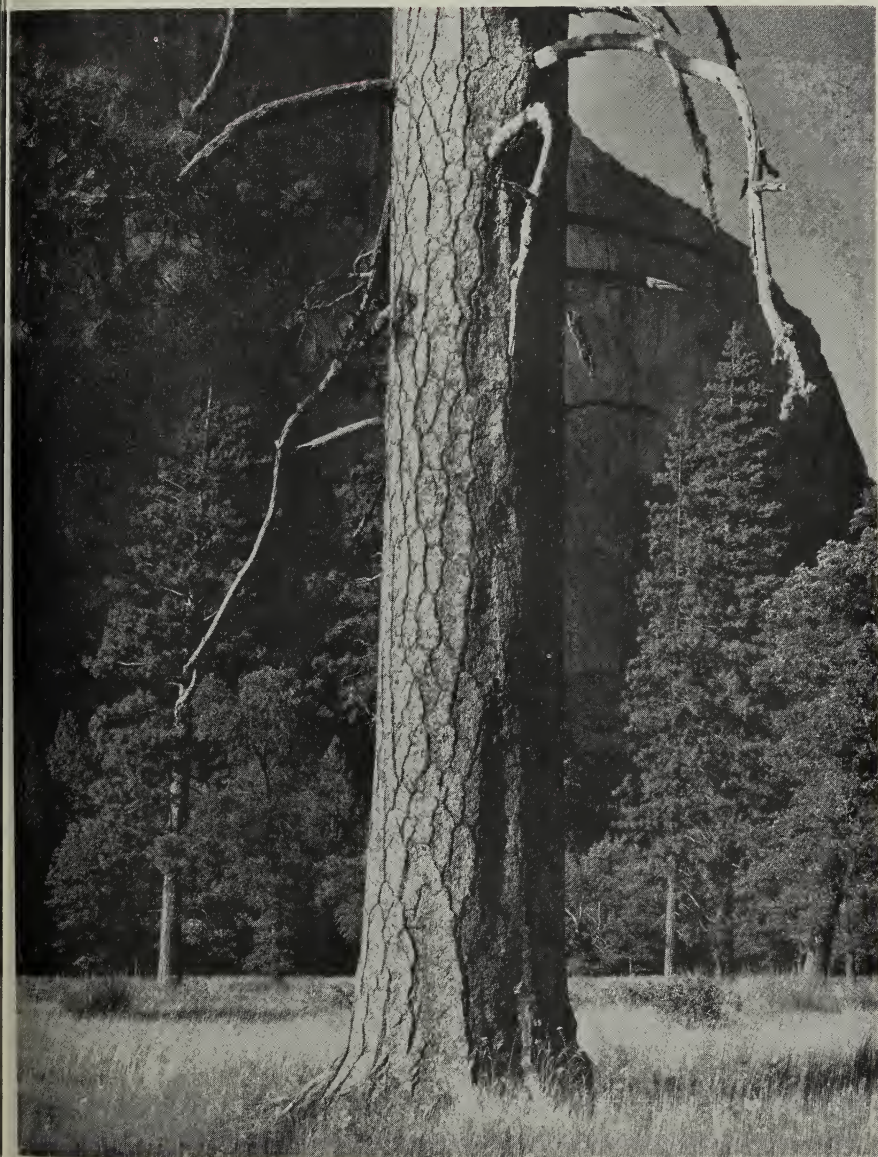
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YOSEMITE NATURE NOTES

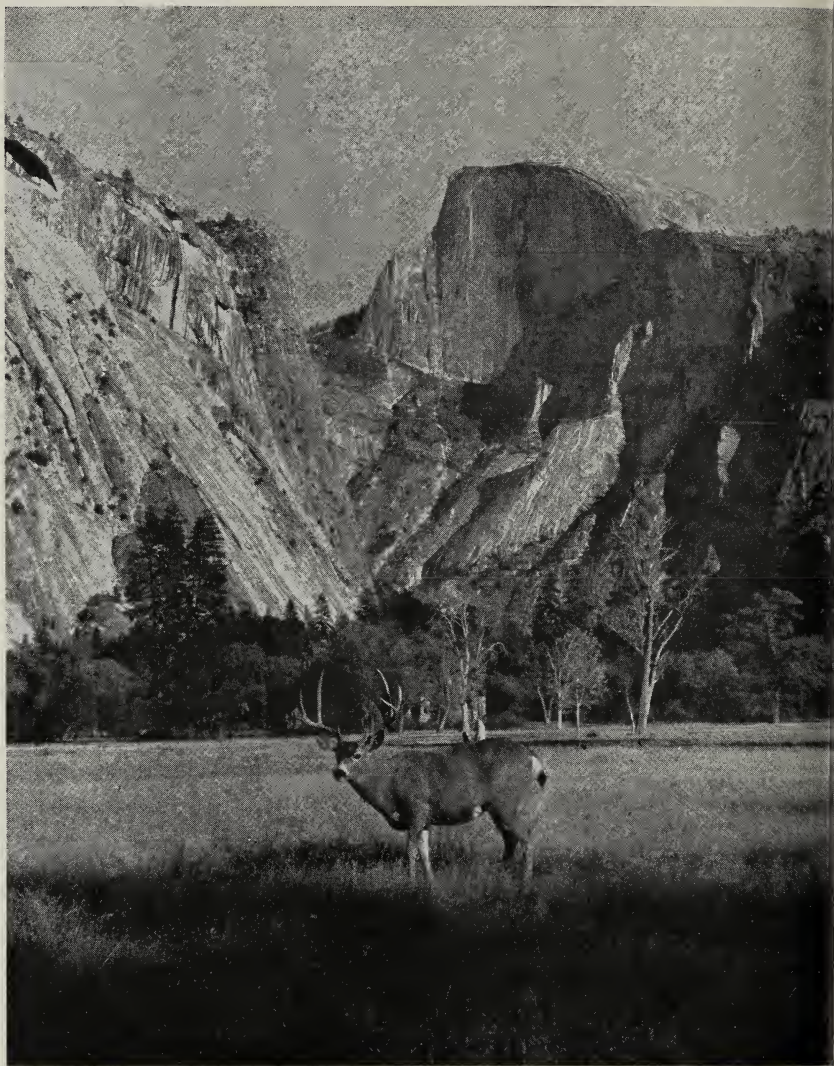
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VOLUME XXXIII • NUMBER 9

SEPTEMBER 1954



*Yellow pine, El Capitan Meadow, Yosemite Valley
—Ansel Adams*



California mule deer in Ahwahnee Meadow

Yosemite Nature Notes

THE MONTHLY PUBLICATION OF

THE YOSEMITE NATURALIST DIVISION AND

THE YOSEMITE NATURAL HISTORY ASSOCIATION, INC.

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SEPTEMBER 1954

NO. 9

"RANGER, WHERE IS ALL THE WILDLIFE?"

By Woodrow W. Smith, Ranger Naturalist

Throughout the summer, walking Glacier Point each day, coming down the hill from the campground mornings, noons, and evenings, the question never occurred to me. Nevertheless the visitors asked continually, "Where is the wildlife?" It is easy to understand why so little wildlife is seen by so many. Consider the 6,500 visitors to Glacier Point on the Fourth of July. Their average length of stay could be estimated at no more than an hour; the most popular time of day for visiting the area is between 12 and 3 in the afternoon; the usual driving time on the road from the valley or Mariposa and back is 2 hours. During the short visit what wildlife does one see? Our omnipresent, ever-ready greeter here as in the valley is the Steller's jay—irrepressible camp policeman, robber, vigilante, and general nuisance, yet serving commendable purpose in clean-up and insect control. In good numbers the blue-bellied lizards interrupt their sunning periods to skitter from the rocks into inaccessible crevices or bushy hideouts, escaping the clutching hands of small-fry visitors. Tahoe chipmunks vie with jays for favors from hotel patrons who toss crumbs from the porch.

White-collared ground squirrels of the Sierra tribe join the banqueters, as do the more numerous golden-mantled relatives.

But with the average day's 2,500 people climbing the paths to the east and north overlooks, not many more forest creatures are to be noticed by the glancing and hurried throng. To assure that Glacier Point is indeed inhabited by wildlife the following incidents are related.

On a get-acquainted mission through the campground on June 21 an interested camper showed me a large log by his tent on which thousands of big, black carpenter ants were locked in battle. They were rearing and snapping, myriads engaged in what appeared to be a disorganized brawl. Perhaps it was our imagination, but it seemed we could hear the clicking of their pincer-like mandibles as they would sense the enemy close by, rise up on back legs, and chop at the nearest portion of the opponent in range. Using their antennae the carpenters were able to distinguish friend from foe by touch or smell. For 4 days and nights the internecine fray continued. Piles of heads were discovered on the ground at the base of the log where smaller workers were

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Exhibit overlook at Glacier Point; Half Dome and Clouds Rest in distance

busy adding to the discard heap. Diminishing numbers of ants fought through the fourth day, but the battle was ended on June 25. The causes and results were unknown to the observers—we could only apply a human interpretation: the ants had returned to the sanity of peaceful coexistence.

During the watch maintained over the battle of the ants, the activities of parent white-breasted nuthatches were noticed. Despite intruders the nestlings peeked out from a hole in a large Jeffrey pine no more than 6 feet up the trunk which stood 15 feet from the ants' battleground. The mother and father were adhering to a frantic feeding schedule to keep their offspring from what, by their actions, seemed the verge of starvation. The young nuthatches were large enough by June 24 to jostle and shove each other almost out of

the nest; evidently the nearest means to the food had the advantage of receiving it. Parental trips to get insects by scrambling down the trunks of neighboring trees, picking life and there in the bark cracks, took each bird 3 minutes per flight on the average. This "shuttle run of an airlift" was continued throughout the morning hours without much hesitation, even when an observer came within 10 feet of the nest. Then the adult birds "henked" a bit as they resented the intrusion. Playing hide-and-seek they would work down the tree on the side opposite the nest, peeking now from the left and then from the right, and then would suddenly dart around into the entrance hole. On June 26 the nuthatches apparently completed this cycle of family life, for the nest was empty. Some white-breasted and more white-breasted nuthatches were very

we in the forest around Glacier Point throughout July and August. A few were seen among branches cambering over partially opened pine cones, "henking" in such roosting voice that the first sight of the faint birds who possessed these hoarse tones always caused surprise. A family of sapsuckers was less fortunate than the nuthatches. For their nest these parents also chose a low hole, which some woodpecker had made in a white fir along the path that leads to the hotel from the campground. They were in the midst of feeding activities the last week of June when a bear must have noticed the accessibility of their hole, for one morning as I came down the path for my daily duties no nest remained—just a large white cavity. Gouged-out dry-rotted wood fragments were scattered at the base of the tree, and a few sapsucker feathers were mixed with them. Claw scratches indicated that a marauding bear had done the deed.

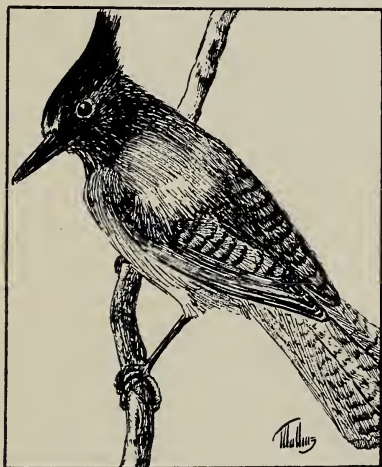
Another effect of animal behavior upon trees was found in the growth of young firs near the start of the footpath from the parking area to the point. The sweet-tasting inner bark of the two firs by the comfort station furnished a late-evening meal for one of our nocturnal visitants, the yellow-haired porcupine. "Porky" has been seen several times in late afternoon on the Four-mile Trail toward Union Point. The dead tops of some of the firs bear evidence of this somewhat destructive appetite.

In a pine by the side of the old Washburn Point road a grouse hen could be seen roosting several evenings in July. During the day she could be depended upon to show up with her chicks somewhere along the upper Illilouette trail, pecking along the pathway like a domestic hen with her brood. Hikers could

pass within a dozen feet without causing undue alarm. Closer than that the chicks would scurry and "freeze" under the shrubs of chinquapin and huckleberry oak; the hen would walk away to draw attention elsewhere. In addition to the grouse there were several families of mountain quail, frequently heard soft-whistling their "bob-white" calls to keep check on one another. Groups of people on nature-walk tours in August were often pleased by the appearance of the quail. On one particular afternoon a hen and eight chicks took turns crossing the Glacier Point Road during a period of heavy traffic. Each of the young birds chose to make the crossing at the most inopportune time—just as a car approached. As each bird ran across in front of a car, it was forced at the last second to flush into flight to keep from being hit. Six cars scored narrow misses; the suspense of watching the sequence of near-accidents was almost unbearable.

White-throated swifts maintained their display of aerial maneuvers over the Glacier Point precipices daily throughout the summer. At times visitors caught sight of pairs of these swept-back-winged "jet planes" practicing strafing skills on scraps of litter caught in updraft swirls of air. Several times the ranger naturalist's Stetson hat became the target for the darting, swooping, twinkling little flyers. Red-tailed and Cooper's hawks would be seen on occasion soaring and climbing with ease in the air currents rising from the valley below. Raucous Clark's nutcrackers flew over in groups of four or five in August and September. From the dozens of winged pine seeds whirling down, one could tell during the first week of September that the nutcrackers

had found the Jeffrey cones opened sufficiently for their harvesting activities. Not to be outdone, nut-hatches, chipmunks, jays, and chickarees all joined the pine-nut festival. It was surprising to see the Tahoe chipmunks clinging to half-opened cones high up in a pine, hanging upside down at times in their effort to dig out the succulent seeds. Jays would volplane down to catch an errant helicoptering seed, turn in midair with the captured prize, and fly to a limb where the meat could be extracted by pounding it free from the shell held firmly in crossed claws.

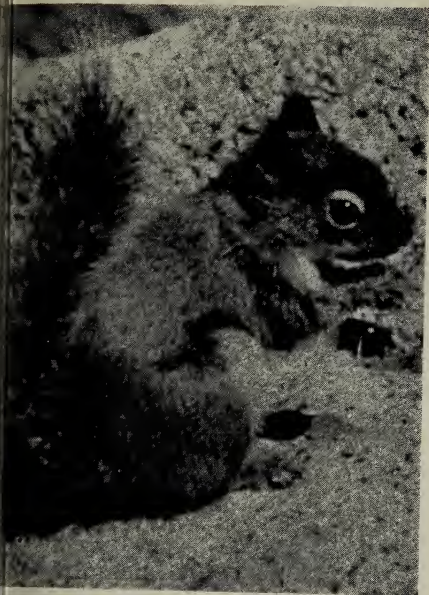


Steller's jay

Golden eagles were sighted four times in August. It may have been coincidence, but on one of those days when a pair of the largest birds circled high above Sentinel Dome and suddenly dived out of sight westward toward Sentinel Rock, a hiker carried an injured fawn up to the point from midway on the Ledge Trail where he had found it lying stunned. Given to the ranger for care, the young animal was examined and found to have scratches on its back. Though no

bones seemed to be broken, internal injuries were evident from the bleeding through the nostrils; it appeared that the fawn, still spotted and probably less than a month old, had fallen from some height. It died within a few hours. Whether it would have lived if left alone is difficult to say, but its chances for survival where its mother could perhaps find and protect it would have been greater. Disturbing it and possibly injuring it further by carrying it to the Ledge Trail was no help, though well-intentioned. Conjecture varies in guessing the cause of the misfortune; could the fawn have fallen as prey to a golden eagle, been dropped, and the eagle interrupted by hikers? Or was the fall the result of a frantic dash away from some other predator such as a mountain lion or coyote? Sufficient evidence was lacking, so no conclusions could be drawn.

Coyotes were prevalent in the Glacier Point area this summer, and as the season progressed campers became more and more accustomed to the emboldened mother and pup, the pair that sounded reveille with a series of yelps and "ki-yi's" as they trotted through the campground at sunup two mornings in a row. One evening at sundown a young coyote set up such a clamor of yipping that we investigated, thinking a car on the Glacier Point Road had hit it and it was crying in pain. As we approached, the pup discreetly trotted up the slope about a hundred yards, sat down, and began another series of wails. When we moved toward it once more, it silently slipped into the tree shadows. Our fourth-grade daughter advanced the hypothesis that the fellow had developed a bad case of indigestion over the garbage diet it had been following.



Parratt

Sierra chickaree

A most popular topic of conversation among campers is that nocturnal plunderer, the playboy bear who hits the "night spots" on the garbage-can circuit. About once a week bears stray from their usual haunts to cause the careless camper some anxiety—food left on picnic tables disappears, food lockers are unlocked open. Efforts to frighten the prowlers away with flashlights, whistles, and banging pans avail little. The camper gains in return for the ordeal a sensational story of the night back to tell the folks back home. Few bears were seen during the daytime. A 2-year-old trying to steal a march on his elders appeared at the hotel one afternoon, a mother and two cubs were in the campground several evenings, and now and then a bear was seen along the road close to Washburn Point. As many as 28 bears have been counted in former years at the garbage-disposal area several miles

south of the hotel. This year a total of 12 bears were recognized as "regulars" at Glacier Point, 9 adults and 3 cubs.

Activities of the Sierra chickaree help to make August and September interesting months at the point. We have learned to watch for the first telltale signs of this small squirrel's work, the "kitchen middens" of detached pine-cone scales scattered around fresh cobs. For safety's sake one needs to recognize the warning "bombs away" after a whiskbroom twig parachutes down from the Jeffrey or sugar pine; in just a few seconds the sticky, heavy cone booms down through the branches, and woe to the person standing in the target area! Following the bombings, sometimes from above one will hear excited chatter descending the scale much like demoniac laughter. Interrupt one of these vivacious rodents while he is harvesting and you will be given to understand that you are trespassing. Stand 20 feet away and the chickaree will usually ignore you; he is in a hurry to complete his meal. Eating the pine nuts by peeling away the "pineapple" scales much as humans eat artichokes, the squirrel I watched finished a Jeffrey cone 8 inches long and 4 inches wide at the base in 8 minutes. Pockets in the cob indicated that 260 seeds constituted his breakfast.

With the ripening and opening of the cones, and the casting of the winged nuts in a short period during late summer, it is no wonder the chickaree is a frantic reaper. His competitors for the nuts—the chipmunks, nuthatches, nutcrackers, and jays—were very much in evidence during the closing days of the busy visitor season. More wildlife than ever, it seemed, as we reluctantly packed to leave after Labor Day.

SALVAGE OF THE TIOGA MINE MACHINERY

By Douglass H. Hubbard, Associate Park Naturalist

One of the most ambitious mining ventures in western history was that of the Great Sierra Consolidated Silver Company, whose headquarters was at Bennettville, now a deserted ghost town about one mile east of Tioga Pass. To facilitate driving the tunnel to cut the Sheepherder and other lodges, supposedly bearing ores of great value, machinery was essential. In the absence of roads it was necessary to snake this equipment up the nearly vertical east face of the Sierra Nevada range from Lundy. A visit to this area will cause one to marvel at the fortitude and perseverance of the men who accomplished this feat in 1882, taking from March 4 to May 8 to move 8 tons a distance of approximately 10 miles. The *Homer Mining Index* of Lundy carries a dramatic account in its issue for March 4, 1882:

The transportation of 16,000 pounds of machinery across one of the highest and most rugged branches of the Sierra Nevada moun-

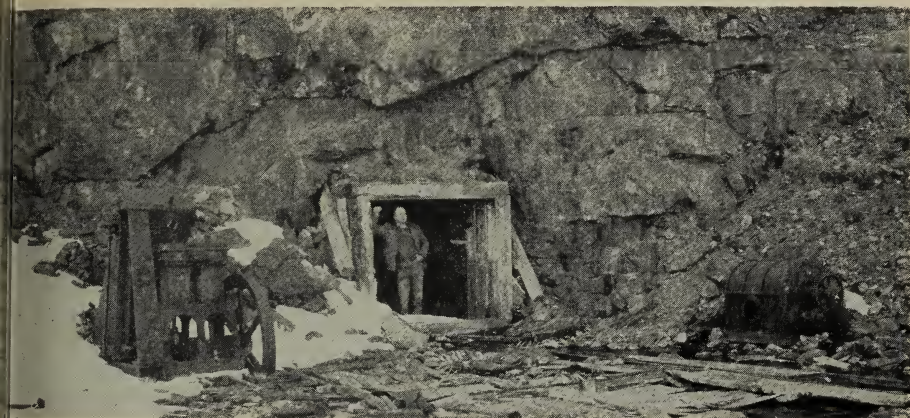
tains in midwinter, where no roads exist over vast fields and huge embankments yielding snow, and in the face of furious storms laden with drifting snow, and mercury dancing attendance on zero, is a task calculated to appal the surdiest mountaineer; and yet J. C. Kemp, Manager for Great Sierra Consolidated Silver Company of Tioga, is now engaged in such an undertaking, and with every prospect of perfect success at an early day—so complete been the arrangement of details . . . machinery will probably be hoisted straight up to the summit of Mount Warren ridge an almost vertical rise of 2,160 feet. From summit the descent will be made to Saddlebags Lake, thence down to and along Vining creek . . . and from that point to Lundy, a distance of about one mile . . . machinery consists of an engine, boiler, compressor. Ingersoll drills, iron pipe, for use in driving the Great Sierra tunnel. It is being transported on six heavy sleds admirably constructed of hardwood . . . pair of bob-sleds, accompanies the expedition . . . laden with bedding, provisions, cooking utensils, etc. The heaviest load 4,200 pounds. Ten or twelve men, two mules, 4,500 feet of 1-inch Manilla rope, heavy cable block and tackle and all the available trees along the route are employed "snaking" the machinery up the mountain.

W. A. Chalfant, in *Gold, Guns and Ghost Towns*, adds:



Bennettville in 1898, Mt. Dana in distance

Celia Crocker Thayer



Bryant

historic mine machinery (compressor, left; blower, right) at entrance to Sheepherder tunnel

each capstan was reached, the apparatus was dismantled and carried forward to the next stage. Inch by inch the traction rope was wound in. . . . The loaded sledges broke through the snow again and again, wedging themselves so they had to be pried out with pole and crowbar, or block and tackle lashed to trees, or to steel arduously set to rocks. Every ounce of propulsive effort was furnished by human muscle.

Nothing was recorded, to our knowledge, of the suffering of the men, but Mr. Kemp, at the completion of the task, was said to have remarked, "It's no wonder that men grow old!"

Difficulties such as these led the company to construct the Great Tierra Wagon Road, later called the Tioga Road, a 21-mile portion of which is in use today, traversing some of Yosemite's most beautiful country.

Financial disagreement among the stockholders caused an abrupt closing down of the mine on July 3, 1884. The old machinery, brought in at such great cost and effort, has been subjected to the ravages of Sierran winters and thoughtless vandals since that date. Late in September this year I was successful in contacting Mr. G. C. Wedertz, present owner of the Tioga property. He and his son, Frank S. Wedertz, realizing the historic value of the

machinery, readily gave their consent to donating and moving it to the Yosemite Museum.

With the willing cooperation of William Stevenson, Stanley Castro, and Ralph Parker of Yosemite road maintenance, we visited Bennettville on September 30 and October 1 and removed the air compressor, blower, tanks, and two small air-driven pumps. These were brought to Yosemite Valley where they will form the nucleus of an exhibit on mining activities of the Yosemite region, to be placed in a hitherto unused corner of the museum garden. This particular machinery, with its interesting story of seemingly unsurmountable difficulties and failure, well deserves the protection it will receive.

As the "cherry-picker" crane effortlessly lifted the heavy compressor from its base and placed it on a truck for its last ride of some 60 miles to Yosemite Valley, to take less than 3 hours, we could not help but think of the sweating crew of hardened miners who labored in the snow for more than 2 months to bring it a distance of 10 miles up the face of the Sierra, and wonder if they might not be watching us from somewhere up on Tioga Hill.

AUTUMN THOUGHTS

By William L. Neely, Ranger Naturalist

MORNING—

Those who live below cannot imagine our Tuolumne Meadows climate. Their sweaty hours pass by while ours are tinged with frost. Nor can I imagine that summer still holds on below in the valleys, so immersed am I in this arctic world. These mornings the meadows before the tent are crisp, and the temptation is to walk among the grass blades and kick frost crystals as one might shuffle through autumn leaves. I do not wander far but that my shoes look as though they had traveled far across the northern tundra.

Writes Thoreau:

Even the grasses in exposed fields were hung with innumerable diamond pendants, which jingled merrily when brushed by the foot of the traveler. It was literally the wreck of jewels and the crash of gems.

There is no time for contemplative thought these mornings. I do my midday chores in early hours—the drawing of water and the eternal chopping of firewood. The axe is as warming as the stove. Coldness makes us aware and sharpens the outlines of our commonest actions. An icy morning and even the tying of shoes becomes painfully memorable.

On such mornings the cracks in the granite are frost-wedged a hair's-breadth wider. Nature goes about her axe-work too. To what end is she warming herself? For what fires does she split kindling of the granite slabs? I feel a satisfaction when I discover that my affairs and those of Nature are similar.

* * *

LATE AFTERNOON—

Even growth itself must emit sound, for in midsummer one is sel-

dom aware of a completely silent forest. The growing of one pine needle may be inaudible but the growing of a forest full of them is perceptible in some manner. Even now autumn has stopped all growth and in this late afternoon of September the forest is at last truly silent.

I walk home from a long ramble afield. After leaving the glacial park ways I cross through a solemn hemlock forest. Even the stirring of protoplasm in leaf cells has apparently slowed to a viscous flow. Unable to penetrate the thick foliage of hemlock boughs during midday, the sun now setting on the mountain rim slides underneath the branches and lights up the tree trunks and slanders down the aisles. These mountain hemlock forests remind me of Grimm's fairy tales, and in their depths I am frequently on the lookout for houses made of gingerbread studded with cookies, or for little gnarled creatures with red caps and long beards, smoking long pipes. My science yields to older mythology and I fear that I may step into some magic ring and change into a squirrel or a pumpkin. The rattling, shattering cry of the Clark nutcrackers winging homeward overhead brings me to my senses but instead of altering only intensifies the solitude.

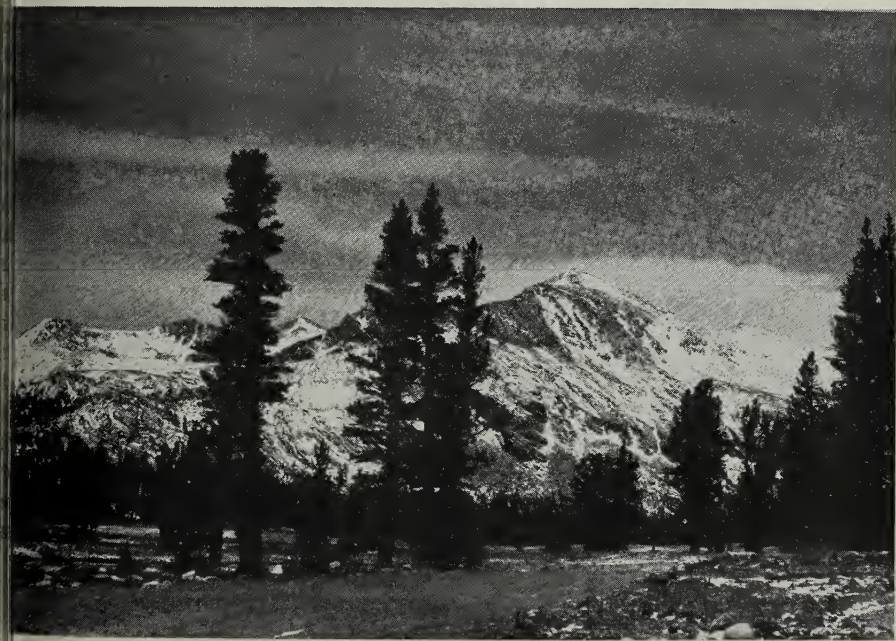
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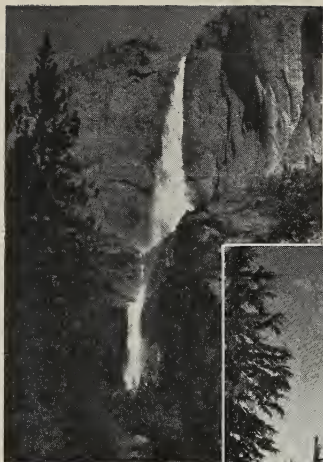
NIGHT—

In the night beneath the trees with shadows can compare to the twilight, starlight is hidden! And there amid the darkness our tent glows with inner light like some huge canvas

upshade in these unlit mountains. The rumbling of the glaciers and the rising of the Sierra have scarcely subsided in such a night where only stars mark our time. I wonder if not in some way the world has gone on by, spinning its spheres while I am out in this awful darkness. The tent is an island of light. I return to it and find only moments elapsed and the stove still warm. How near we live to the edge of eternity! Rip Van Winkle was but a bubbling infant when he returned. I am only surprised that we are not dizzy in our rotation about the heavens. The earth turns and sets its clocks, while we cannot turn with it but must rush perversely the other way, not counterclockwise but

countertimewise, and it is the wise man who lets the earth do his traveling for him. The Whirling Dervish was perhaps better occupied than some of us, for at least he came to rest at night and occasionally said great things. And they say they have seen the world and all its wonders who travel over it in a summer vacation, trying to keep up with the times by the news, where it may have been better had they come to rest and elevated their minds to such a height that the world could turn beneath them. In these few moments outside the tent tonight I found myself in the nebular regions, and was surprised at my homing instinct in finding again our planet and galaxy after my wandering.

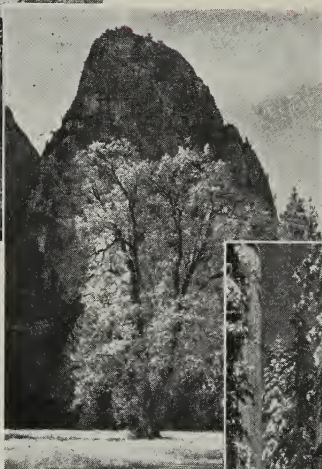




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